The issue of Consent and Privacy in the World of Social Media

Every day, people all over the world post videos or photos on social media. It is estimated that roughly 14 billion posts are shared, and somewhere in these numbers lies a post of you or someone you love, taken and posted by someone, without your permission.

For most of human history, privacy was valued and defended for every individual. Privacy belongs to us, just as our names do. What we reveal and to whom we reveal it is our decision. It should be done deliberately, sometimes carefully. But social media has become a place where people decide what the world gets to learn about you through a tag, repost, or a forwarded chat without consulting first.

Boundaries are being crossed casually everywhere, often without the person's knowledge. There could be a photo of a person whose face is making an odd expression, and that picture gets publicized, simply for entertainment. But no one thinks about how the person feels.

A parent documents a child's early life in detail, long before that child is old enough to decide what stays online and what should not.

A message sent in trust turns into a screenshot or a forwarded message that travels far beyond its original sender. Later, this may be used to mock or ridicule that individual. Each time, what should have been a choice is made for someone else.

It's not just a matter of a photo or a message being shared—an individual's narrative is controlled by someone else. Most of the time, people simply do not think to ask anymore. This is not necessarily because they mean harm, but because they believe asking is no longer necessary. But why is asking not a necessity?

Firstly, their dignity is compromised. When a photo of someone is shared for fun, with no room for the person in it to think, it makes them feel as though they are being treated as content rather than as a human being. That particular moment becomes something everyone can repeatedly watch rather than simply a moment that the person experienced.

Also, there is the question of rights. Privacy has never been something people simply give away. The discomfort someone feels when a photo appears online without warning is not new, as people have felt this before. What is different now is that the device acts as the trigger.

This can cause people to change the way they speak and behave, since they seem to believe they are being watched. Celebrities often act this way, adjusting their expressions and movements the moment they see paparazzi recording them. That same instinct can happen to an ordinary person in their local area when they know they are being recorded.

Finally, there is the matter of trust between people. Having a conversation would feel different if someone constantly wondered whether it might be recorded and shared. That hesitation changes what people are willing to say out loud. Within families and friendships, people often understand that some things should remain private. Without that trust, people may become more cautious about what they say and start choosing their words carefully, without explaining why.

These types of patterns can be seen everywhere. Posts showing visitors or bystanders who were never granted permission are not uncommon. This is especially common at weddings, birthday parties, and other school or university events.

Children's accomplishments and milestones are being posted by parents online, often with more private details than they would

disclose to people they do not know.

A conversation between two people could end up circulating if their relationship changes and one side decides to expose the other. In most instances, this has become a habit that millions of people engage in daily without considering the consequences.

People have always shared stories with each other, celebrated one another in public, been appreciative of each other, and found meaning in being seen. Sharing was never the problem here. It is the way people utilize social media. While social media can bring distant people closer and help people find communities they would never have encountered on their own, it can also have the opposite effect. That is because the habit of checking first, before deciding how someone else gets seen, has disappeared.

Consider the difference between a letter and a postcard. A letter often arrives in an envelope, and everyone understands that opening someone else’s letter violates privacy; on the other hand, a postcard comes without a cover. It can be read by anyone who happens to see it because it was intentionally left visible. Messages can work in much the same way. What was once meant to be a sealed letter later became a postcard.

Respect will not happen on its own. No app can force people to respect one another's privacy; that responsibility belongs to the person holding the phone. A friend could reread the forwarded message and ask themselves, “How would they feel about this?” A parent could check in with their child, who is old enough to answer, before posting their photo on Facebook.

It does not take much effort. All that is required is a willingness to treat people with respect from the start. Respect does not happen automatically; it should not come after someone is hurt.

However, there are ways to prevent these types of incidents from happening to the next person. Changing this habit starts with a few simple actions: respecting people’s privacy, asking for permission, and including the people involved in decisions about how their photos, posts, or messages are shared, rather than treating them as content.

Ultimately, a large number of photos, videos, and stories move across social media every single day. Most of the time, it is easy to scroll past these posts without feeling anything at all. But we often come across photos of people who are unaware that they are being recorded. So, the next time you forward a photo or a message to a group chat or a public feed, pause for a moment and ask yourself one question: “Would the person in it have said yes if I asked?”

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